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**Why Campaigns for Local Transportation  
Funding Initiatives Succeed or Fail:  
An Analysis of Four Communities and National Data**

Case Study on Seattle RTA 1995 and 1996 elections extracted [here](#).

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16. Abstract As funding from state and national sources has dwindled and demands for relief from traffic and congestion have grown, local governments and transportation agencies are increasingly left to develop their own sources of enhanced revenues. Frequently the bid to increase available revenues comprises a local ballot measure, enabling the citizens served by these governments and agencies to express their preferences for or against increased taxation in support of an improved transportation system. What determines the success of campaigns in support of such ballot measures? To answer this question, this report includes the use of two different approaches and data sources.  1) A statistical analysis of <i>community-level characteristics</i> . Data from localities across the nation, as well those within the state of California, that have conducted elections for transportation tax increase are analyzed to determine what factors seem to affect the outcome of such elections.  2) Case studies of four communities that recently conducted elections for transportation tax increases (Santa Clara and Sonoma Counties in California, and the Denver and Seattle metropolitan areas). The case studies allow for in-depth, qualitative understanding of what election strategies and other campaign elements comprise successful or unsuccessful efforts to raise local revenues.  Among the most significant findings from the statistical analysis of local elections were the following:  <i>Efforts to fund transportation with taxes where the proportion of elderly is greater than 9 percent are more likely to succeed</i> In communities where the percentage of elderly is greater than 9 percent, the analysis indicates that voters may be more willing to accept local transportation taxes. However, in communities where the percentage of elderly is less than 9 percent, transportation measures may require significantly more determined marketing to enhance the probability of passage.  <i>Efforts to increase sales taxes for transportation programs will be less successful in communities with higher sales taxes.</i> A relatively strong and negative relationship between sales tax and support for transportation tax initiatives was identified in the national election data. This suggests that communities with relatively higher sales taxes will be hard pressed to convince citizens to support additional increases.			
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### **CASE STUDY III**

#### **Seattle: Funding for regional public transit (1996)**

In November of 1996, voters in the Puget Sound region of Washington state passed a \$3.9 billion tax increase for the funding of a comprehensive, multi-modal, regional, public transit system. The initiative included funding for

transit improvements, including light rail and commuter rail, as well as expanded express bus service, and high occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes for existing freeways. Funding for these improvements was culled from increases in local sales and motor vehicle excise tax rates. Despite the fact that a similar initiative had failed the previous year, the 1996 plan passed by a substantial majority (56.6% in favor regionwide), including majorities in each of the three counties included in the Puget Sound Region. The 1996 ballot measure represented the largest transportation tax and public works project ever approved by popular vote in the state's history.

This case represents an example of how public officials can learn from past mistakes and refashion an initiative to maximize public support. It also provides evidence that strategic use of marketing techniques can help buttress an effective campaign and confirms the strategic importance of building effective political coalitions for public transportation.

Among the individuals interviewed for this case were the staff from the local transportation agency, several consultants associated with the campaign, Chamber of Commerce staff, and individuals associated with an earlier, unsuccessful transportation tax measure. Key documents consulted included a report issued by the local transportation agency (Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority 1997), one issued by the campaign's consultants (Gogerty and Stark 1997), and coverage from the *Seattle Times*.

#### Background: transportation and traffic

Regional transit has been a concern for the Seattle area since at least the late 1960s. Citizen frustration with growing congestion, fueled by urban sprawl, has long been present in the area, although comprehensive attempts have typically failed. Survey data concerning citizen attitudes toward transportation issues are not readily available but the sources consulted for this review unanimously support the conclusion that most, if not nearly all, area residents were very concerned about traffic and congestion and their impact on the livability of the Seattle area. Empirical data suggests that this concern was legitimate.

While Seattle consistently tops listings of the nation's most-livable cities, it has also regularly placed high in surveys of cities with the worst congestion problems. In 1996, Seattle had the third-highest average round-trip commuting time: 60.3 minutes (*Seattle Times* November 1, 1996). The Texas Transportation Institute ranked Seattle as the sixth most congested city in a recent ranking of 50 urban areas nationwide.

The population has increased from 1.8 million in 1970 to 2.8 million in 1999 in King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties, which make up the Central Puget

Sound Regional Transit Authority (RTA) service area. Residents of the region are living farther and farther away from where they work. In 1980, 11.6 percent of employees in the region worked in one county while living in another; in 1990, that number had increased to 15 percent. Many households have two people working outside the home, meaning more trips per household. From 1971 to 1987, the average number of daily trips per household increased 28 percent.

A great deal of the congestion is associated with commuting to the workplace and more and more commuters are driving to work alone. According to the 1990 Census, the proportion of workers in the region who drove alone to work increased from 64 percent in 1980 to 73 percent in 1990. While total daily transit trips rose between 1961 and 1990, the proportion of transit trips compared with all trips dropped from 5.2 percent to 3.3 percent. This figure, however, obscures the fact that transit is a key component of regional transportation.

The state Department of Transportation found that vehicle miles traveled increased by more than 80 percent between 1981 and 1991, from 30 million to 55.2 million. During the same period, the region's population grew by just over 20 percent, indicating that traffic grew at nearly four times the rate of growth in the population. The traffic growth resulted more from the increasing number of miles traveled by each person than from the increasing number of people or jobs, the study concluded.

Available data suggest that the traffic and congestion woes of the area will worsen in the future. Since 1990 alone, the average number of automobile trips has doubled (*Newsweek* July 19, 1999, p.25). The population in King, Pierce, Snohomish, and Kitsap counties is expected to increase from about 2.7 million in 1990 to 4.1 million in 2020. The number of jobs in those counties is projected to grow during the same period from 1.4 million to 2.2 million.

Prior to the passage of the 1996 transportation initiative, transportation in the Puget Sound region was essentially limited to buses operated by various agencies throughout the area and, of course, individual automobiles. At least three ambitious mass transit plans failed to receive adequate support from voters over the thirty-year period preceding the passage of the 1996 ballot measure.

#### Background: political history

The primary entity with decision-making authority for regional transportation in the Puget Sound area is the Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (RTA). Creation of regional transit authorities was enabled in 1992 by the state legislature, partially in response to the inability of its predecessors to conduct

effective regional transportation planning. In 1993, county councils in King, Pierce, and Snohomish authorized creation of the RTA. RTA board members and staff are the primary agents responsible for the transportation plans recounted in this chapter.

These three counties represent a large, disparate portion of northwestern Washington, including the cities of Seattle, Redmond, and Bellevue (King County), Tacoma (Pierce County), and Everett (Snohomish County). Many smaller suburban and exurban communities fall within the three counties that comprise the district.

The RTA board is comprised of 18 members, including the state secretary of transportation (*ex officio*) and 17 locally elected officials nominated by each of the three county's executive official and confirmed by the respective county councils. Each board position represents 145,000 voters, and one-half of the board are also members of local public transit agency boards. Thus, although the Board is tied to the political process, it is not directly elected and is closely associated with public transit agencies.

The enabling legislation that created the RTA charged it with the duty of creating and presenting to voters a regional plan within two years. This placed enormous pressure on the RTA to devise a plan in a limited time period. The resulting plan was an extremely ambitious one: in October of 1994, the RTA Board submitted a \$6.7 billion, 16-year, multi-modal transit proposal to be voted on in March of the following year. Only two of the 18 RTA Board members opposed the plan, including the mayor of the district's most northern community, Everett.

According to interviews conducted for this report, this plan was necessarily assembled in haste in order to meet the legislature's mandate. The eventual failure of the plan to obtain the necessary majority of votes may be attributed to a variety of factors. This report focuses on a subsequent proposal but the fate of the 1995 proposal is instructive in a number of ways. A widely held view among those close to the passage of the subsequent measure is that transit proponents learned from the mistakes associated with the earlier project.

Among the circumstances associated with the failure of the 1995 proposal are the following:

- 1) A lack of lead time to conduct campaign. The proposal was required by law to be approved by each county. Approval was not achieved until approximately December of 1994, leaving proponents only three months before the March, 1995 election to advance their cause. Opposition to the plan was well organized, and preceded formal completion of the ballot measure

(2) The perceived “Seattle-centric” nature of proposal. Many of the proposed improvements involved projects in and around the downtown core of Seattle, including an expensive rail tunnel. The light rail line proposal stopped two miles south of Everett.

(3) A special election ballot. In order to meet the legislative mandate for a vote on a regional transit plan within two years, RTA was forced to submit the proposal for a special, off-year election. Such elections are thought to attract lower turnout and higher percentages of older or tax-resistant voters.

(4) An under-funded campaign in favor of passage. Proponents budgeted a \$1.2 million campaign, but were only able to raise a little more than half of that amount.

(5) Lingering effects of economic recession. The economy of the region was threatened by a coincidental announcement from the largest employer, the Boeing Company, that it would lay off 6,700 workers. Much of the rest of the local economy was also down.

One other aspect of the campaign warrants special emphasis. The election for the 1995 proposal was a special one, with no other elections measures appearing on the ballot. Some scholars have argued that the electorate for special elections, nearly always smaller, is more fiscally conservative than that associated with general elections, particularly presidential ones. For that reason, some observers believe that the 1995 ballot measure would have passed had it been offered during a general election.

During the brief campaign, opponents of the measure attempted to depict the plan as elitist, a creation of “top-down” bureaucrats, out of touch with the local citizenry. Some observers feel that the opposition successfully defined the issues and controlled the campaign, focusing attention to the details of the plan rather than the urgency of the need for a regional approach to transportation issues. In any case, the negative synergy created by these factors was apparently sufficient to doom the proposal. On March 15, 1995, voters in the RTA district rejected it by a vote of 53 percent to 47 percent. Voters from outside of Seattle were much more likely to oppose the plan. In northern Snohomish county, opponents outvoted supporters by 65 percent to 35 percent.

#### Developing a transportation coalition

The failure of the 1995 ballot initiative notwithstanding, support among key business and political institutions was, by all counts, fairly strong if not manifest in financial support for campaigning. Organized opposition to the measure was led, at least nominally, by narrowly focused interest groups in communities furthest from the center of the region, downtown Seattle.



However, although it did little or nothing to oppose the plan, neither was the greater business community an enthusiastic supporter of the plan. Some funding to oppose the 1995 plan was contributed by pro-highway and environmental groups. As proponents of a second initiative planned their next move, efforts were made to court leaders of these groups.

Perhaps of greater significance was the marked increase of support by the Boeing Company, the largest employer of the region. This development was probably not solely due to efforts by supporters of a transportation plan; instead, it was apparently the fortuitous result of the arrival of a new CEO at Boeing (Phillip Condit) who took a more active interest in public affairs than his predecessor. Boeing's importance to the regional political landscape is even greater than that suggested by its corporate size. Traditionally, the rest of the business community looks to Boeing for leadership, and tends to scale donations to political campaigns according to that offered by Boeing.

#### Creating a transportation initiative

Transit advocates used a multi-faceted strategy to create a new transportation initiative that could attract majority support from the region's voters, including the following components.

- Dividing the region into five areas, in order to create a plan that would have more widespread support
- Extensive public outreach
- Initial release of "guiding principals," rather than specific plan

*Disaggregation of service area.* Faced with the perception, perhaps valid, that the original (1995) regional transportation was too "Seattle-centric," RTC decided to divide the region into five sub-areas: Snohomish County, Seattle, Pierce County, East King County, and South King County. Each sub-area would, in effect, help fashion and submit its own plan and the consequent set of plans would be reformulated into a regionwide plan. This approach, although it risked creation of an incoherent regional transportation strategy, helped to ensure that the emergent regional plan would reflect the needs and interests of the entire constituency. Dividing the region in this way implicitly acknowledged that passing a transportation initiative "boils down to local politics." As the plan for the 1996 ballot initiative took shape, proponents were able to demonstrate to each part of the region how many resources would be brought to bear on improving transportation in their area.

### *Public Outreach*

Concomitantly, the RTA created the Regional Outreach Committee to help ensure that a new ballot measure would appeal to the entire RTA service area. Members of this 15-member group represented each of the five subareas and were tapped from existing transportation boards and commissions. The group met regularly, with meetings open to the public and news media. Informal meetings with constituent groups, city councils, and other community leaders were also conducted throughout the sub-areas identified by RTA. Opponents to the 1995 plan were also invited to participate in various outreach events, some organized by independent groups. Over the course of the year, thousands of public outreach meetings were conducted.

### *Release of “guiding principles.”*

Rather than merely scale down the spending called for by the rather massive 1995 plan, the RTA Board endeavored to commit itself to a fresh approach. Before it set to work on the specifics of the new plan, the board released a set of “guiding principles” that would oblige it to create a significantly different plan. Of paramount significance, the board acknowledged that enhanced bus service would have to be part of the new plan, since rail transit could not practically serve all suburban areas of the service district. Among the principles the RTA Board committed to were:

- 1) The new proposal would be regional, yet would address local needs in each of the five sub-areas.
- 2) Spending in the sub-areas would correspond to the taxes raised in each.
- 3) The proposal would create high capacity transit with a multi-modal approach, including rail, bus, access ramps for high occupancy vehicle lanes, and general traffic improvements.

In sum, the board’s approach to transportation planning was significantly different than that associated with the 1995 plan. It reflected the political and fiscal realities of the time. By publicly adhering to these principles, the board was much more likely to create a plan that would attract majority support regionwide. Although some public opinion polling was used to determine the overall level of support for a new initiative, yielding encouraging figures, the details of the plan itself were the result of public outreach in light of the “guiding principles” listed above. More intensive use of research techniques did not begin until the new proposal had solidified.

### Overview of transportation initiative

After consideration of the various forms of public outreach and the “guiding principals” the RTA Board had established for itself, a draft plan was released in March of 1996. Release of the proposal inevitably fueled more intense debate about the details of the final plan among the various groups and interests whose support was important to the success of the final campaign. With some minor changes the final plan adopted by the RTA board two months later (May 1996). Of the 18 board members, only two King County Council members (from the suburban areas east of Seattle) voted against the plan. The board voted to submit the measure for the November 1996 ballot, which allowed five months for the campaign to pass it.

The proposal included the following major components.

- A ten-year, \$3.9 billion regional transportation plan funded with sales and motor vehicle excise tax increases
- Light rail in the region’s densest areas and commuter rail using existing railroad tracks in other areas
- Enhanced access to HOV lanes
- Regional express bus service
- “Seamless” fare integration between regional transit components and
- An independent citizen review panel to oversee RTA and construction of the system

Compared to the 1995 plan, this proposal was much more modest in scale. Major differences between the two plans are summarized below. The difference in cost between the two proposals is primarily the result of a less elaborate commuter and light rail system in the 1996 proposal. By substituting less expensive alternatives (bus and HOV access ramp construction), the less costly 1996 plan appears to directly serve more of the RTA region than did the 1995 proposal.

Clearly, the 1996 package was intended to address the perceived political weaknesses of the 1995 measure. For example, it eliminated rail transit in East King county, where opponents had criticized the 1995 plan. The addition of HOV lanes would help make the plan more attractive to those who believed that the 1995 proposal would do little to alleviate traffic congestion. Light rail service from between Tacoma and Seattle was eliminated in favor of a short link between central Tacoma and the Tacoma Dome commuter rail station.

**Table 3-1. RTA Proposal**

	<b>1995 Proposal</b>	<b>1996 Proposal</b>
Cost	\$6.7 billion	\$3.9 billion
Life span	16 years	10 years
Commuter Rail	Yes	Yes
Light Rail	Yes	Yes
Express Bus	No	Yes
HOV Access Ramps	No	Yes

Devising and implementing a marketing and campaign strategy

In May of 1996, the campaign committee hired the polling firm of Evans and McDonough to conduct a public opinion survey about issues associated with the new ballot measure. Results from the poll indicated that a majority of respondents were highly concerned with the issue of traffic and congestion and were supportive of a publicly funded solution. More specifically, the research showed that about three out of four prospective voters thought “traffic/transportation was the most important problem facing the region and that a public solution should be a high priority.” Moreover, 58% of those polled would vote in favor of “a public solution.” However, results from the poll also suggested that support for public funding decreased when focus was applied to the details of the plan.

With these results in mind, the campaign committee hired the consulting firm of Gogerty and Stark to conduct the campaign, including supporting research activities. Although much of their more recent work has been for private sector concerns, Gogerty and Stark had been conducting campaigns since 1968. They were assisted by a media consultant who created the specific advertisements used by the campaign.

The general research strategy used by Gogerty and Stark was to use focus groups as a cost-effective means of understanding voter response to the campaign, and a series of surveys to monitor voter support. One major consideration in formulating the campaign was to avoid the perceived mistakes of the failed 1995 campaign. In the view of the consultants, one of the reasons that campaign had failed was that opponents were successfully able to make the details of the plan the campaign’s main issue. However, principals from the firm also believed that, generally speaking, such initiatives do better after

initial failures. The public seems to be wary of initial proposals, and collectively “waits for a better deal” that comes with subsequent proposals.

Focus groups were the linchpin research activity for the campaign. Through a series of focus groups, conducted with prospective voters from various parts of the region, Gogerty and Stark were able to fashion what turned out to be a successful campaign strategy. The insights from focus groups were gathered as follows:

1) Participants were asked about the most important problem facing the Seattle area. In each group, an average of 8 out of 10 respondents replied “transportation.” In every group except one, a majority “passed” the actual ballot language.

2) Respondents were then shown the details of the 1996 regional transportation proposal in the form of informational brochures and diagrams and asked to discuss it. As the details of the plan became known, the number of questions and concerns increased. In most of the groups, within half an hour, most participants moved from support for the plan to opposition because they learned it did not benefit them individually.

3) Additional arguments in favor of the measure (such as, “It’s time to do something!”) left a positive impression with participants, but did not affect their support for their measure. On the other hand, exposure to opposition’s arguments against the plan (e.g., “The plan won’t reduce congestion”) seemed to cause respondents to “step back and look at the whole picture” and reignited support for it.

From this pattern of responses, Gogerty and Stark formulated a “counter-intuitive” communications campaign for the measure. Rather than emphasizing and extolling the virtues of the details of the plan, the strategy was based on drawing attention to the opposition and its apparently overplayed message. The campaign would actually use the opposition’s arguments against themselves. This approach had the secondary benefit of not allowing the opposition to focus debate back on the details of the plan, which had been part of the downfall of the 1995 plan.

The “strategic communications plan” devised by Gogerty and Stark reflected the results of the focus group research along with a media strategy that would maximize voter contact. According to Gogerty and Stark, the objectives of the plan were:

1) Inoculate against the opposition’s anti-arguments by presenting them to voters first and countering with a positive theme.

- 2) Explain the general merits of the proposal without getting buried in the details.
- 3) Inform voters that the opposition had no plan for an alternative solution.
- 4) Compare the RTA plan to the “do-nothing” alternative.
- 5) Ask the voters the question that the proposal answered: “Do you want to get started on solving our region’s transportation problem?”
- 6) Establish the message that, “It’s time to do something,” and that, “The RTA plan is the right first step in solving the regions transportation problem.”

Proponents for the measure had raised \$850,000, of which 80 percent was allocated to citizen contact, as indicated in table 3-2:

**Table 3-2. PR Funding**

Expenditure Category	Amount	% of total	Units purchased
Television ads	\$549,000	81.5%	2,000 gross rating points
Direct Mail	\$91,000	13.5%	169,000 pieces
Leaflets	\$4,000	.5%	15,000 pieces
Radio Advertising	\$16,000	2.3%	4 stations; 6-8 times per day; 5 days
Yard Signs	\$13,000	1.9%	5,000 signs

The conscious strategy was to focus on mass media advertising, particularly television, to create an “impact campaign.” This decision was apparently based on the corporate philosophy at Gogerty and Stark, which believes that it is nearly impossible to win this type of campaign without mass media. The funds budgeted to television ads were intended to ensure that each member of the target audience of registered voters saw an ad 21 times.

None of the ads or other media used in the campaign were targeted to specific demographic groups or regions, although survey research had suggested that women were more likely to support the measure and that opposition was stronger in the further reaches of the region. Instead, the campaign sought to

saturate the public with the pre-emptive attack on the opposition's lack of a viable alternative and its own positive message, "It's about time."

#### Opposition efforts

Opponents of the measure again raised campaign funds from road construction and suburban real estate interests, but were much less successful in doing so than for the previous (1995) campaign. They raised several hundred thousand dollars less than the RTA campaign. Using the acronym "COST" (Citizens Opposed to Sitting in Traffic), the opposition apparently played into the hands of the Gogerty and Stark strategy by raising the same issues, and the same negativism, that had been so successful for them in the earlier campaign. Unlike the RTA campaign, the opposition relied more heavily on direct mail and radio spots, presumably because that they lacked the funds to match the RTA's television ad blitz. As in 1995, the local news media gave significant publicity to the opposition, but without the same effect. However, two local newspapers endorsed the measure.

#### Outcome evaluation

The election occurred on November 5, 1996, and the measure was adopted by a sizeable 56.5 percent majority. Perhaps more impressively, the measure won a majority of votes from all three counties in the RTA service area, whereas its predecessor had failed in the two suburban counties. How can the success of the measure best be understood?

First, it is possible that the success of the 1996 initiative can be nearly entirely explained by the fact it was contested during a high turnout Presidential election, whereas its predecessor lost during a special election. Given the insights gained by research during the 1996 campaign, which revealed that focus on proposal details was generally detrimental to its support, this interpretation seems even more plausible. During the special 1995 election, the local news media and proposal opponents drew attention to debate of proposal specifics in the absence of other elections and issues. The successful proposal received less attention of this sort.

Second, while the first proposal was in some ways the victim of unfortunate circumstances, the successful measure benefited from the opposite. The arrival of a new, more public affairs-oriented CEO at the Boeing Corporation, as well as the general upswing of the local economy, created a more favorable environment for a transportation plan of this scale.

That being said, the value of "lessons learned" from the unsuccessful 1995 proposal cannot be overemphasized, and is perhaps the single most important factor in accounting for the success of the 1996 ballot measure. No single,

critical “lesson” can be identified, but proponents clearly gained from the hindsight of the 1995 campaign. Among these lessons were the following:

- The need for a longer lead-in time for the campaign, in order to raise adequate funds and plan.
- The need to make the plan attractive to all parts of the region, and to lessen the perceived Seattle bias of the 1995 proposal.
- The need to move the focus of the campaign from a debate of the proposal specifics to the general need for a public response to the region’s transportation problem.

Of equal importance, at least in the minds of RTA officials, was the rethinking of the planning process that anchored the creation of the successful ballot measure. Rather than presenting the public with a plan, the RTA made significant efforts to conduct public outreach and solicited input from all areas within the region. The move was apparently successful in reshaping public perceptions about the nature of project planning at RTA. Concomitantly, the agency’s decision to recast the region into five sub-areas helped ensure that the resulting plan would be perceived as fair to each.

Finally, the strategic approach of Gogerty and Stark was apparently effective. Focusing the campaign on the opponent’s failure to propose a reasonable alternative to RTA’s plan made it difficult for the opposition to repeat its attacks on the RTA’s new proposal. Interestingly, the campaign strategy did not, for the most, rely upon demographic analysis or other forms of market segmentation, instead a general mass media approach proved successful.

The Seattle experience should provide encouragement to localities that have suffered setbacks in passing transportation initiatives. Careful consideration of past defeats can help ensure the success of future efforts.